

Thomas Witlam Atkinson 1799-1861

Born in Cawthorne, the son of a stone mason on the Spencer Stanhope estate, Thomas became an architect, having been the clerk of works to George Basevi (1794-1845) and worked also for the architect H.E. Kendall.

In about 1827, he set up an architectural practice in Blackfriars, London. He later set up an architectural practice in Manchester with Alfred Bowyer Clayton (1795-1855) where he designed villas for the rich merchants of the city and some city centre buildings.

Thomas designed the new Gothic style church at Tooting which was built between 1830-1833. He profited from the money made available by Parliament under the Church Building Acts of 1818 and 1824. The churches built under these Acts are variously known as Commissioners' churches or Waterloo churches. The church was remodelled in the 1870s.

Thomas was the architect responsible for St. Luke's church in Cheetham Hill, Manchester, consecrated in 1839. His design was criticised as being a copy of St. James Louth. Thomas strongly defended his position. The church was designed to hold 1500 and the tower and spire stood 170 feet tall. A newspaper article of the time said that one was struck with awe and reverence for the Almighty when entering. At this time, Thomas was living in Chorlton.

In 1829 Thomas and Charles Atkinson published a book : "Gothic Ornaments selected from the different Cathedrals and Churches in England". Examples of stonework from many churches are shown and the churches named may give a clue to Thomas's work over the previous years. The book has no text and may have been designed as a stonemason's pattern book. Charles Atkinson may or may not have been related to Thomas. His later life proved rather eventful in Tasmania.

In the early 1840s Thomas competed to design a new church to replace St. Nicholas, Hamburg which had been destroyed by fire. From there he made his way to St. Petersburg, describing himself as an artist and then commenced his 39,000 mile journey across Central Asia painting as he went. Some of his work from that period is displayed in this exhibition. He published two books about his travels which are also in the exhibition. He died in Walmer in 1861 where he is buried.